

Practicing Reform, Performing Belonging: Religious Practice and Social Identity among Muhammadiyah Members

Azzam Ghaziurrohman

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia
aghaziurrohman@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines how religious practices produce, express, and contest social identity among Muhammadiyah members in Indonesia. Rather than treating membership as a fixed doctrinal category, it uses qualitative thematic synthesis of organizational documents, historical ethnographies, and empirical studies published no later than 2023. The analysis identifies six interconnected themes: the reformist prototype of the 'good Muslim'; ritual discipline and tarjih-based authority; associational piety through study circles, mosques, and cadre networks; al-Ma'un-oriented social service; boundary negotiation with local traditions and other Islamic currents; and identity differentiation across gender, generation, class, region, and digital settings. The findings show that Muhammadiyah identity is reproduced less through formal membership than through repeated participation in worship, learning, organizational work, philanthropy, and public service. Yet practice is neither uniform nor mechanically determined by official doctrine. Members selectively interpret guidance, accommodate local customs, and negotiate competing religious authorities. The study concludes that Muhammadiyah identity is best understood as institutionalized but lived reformism: a socially recognizable repertoire whose coherence depends on continuous socialization, practical credibility, and room for contextual variation.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah; religious practice; social identity; lived religion; Islamic reformism.

INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah is often classified as a modernist or reformist Islamic organization, and its collective identity is commonly summarized through doctrinal terms such as *tajdid*, purification, rationality, and *Islam Berkemajuan*. These formulations are indispensable, but they can make identity appear more coherent than it is in everyday life. The social identity of Muhammadiyah members is not produced by doctrine alone. It is formed through bodily routines, mosque participation, study circles, family education, organizational meetings, charitable work, media consumption, and encounters with people who follow different Islamic traditions. Identity is therefore not merely what Muhammadiyah officially says it is; it is what members repeatedly do, recognize, defend, modify, and transmit (Peacock, 1978; Nakamura, 2012).

This distinction matters because formal membership is an unreliable proxy for lived affiliation. Some people hold membership cards and occupy organizational positions but participate irregularly in worship or cadre activities. Others attend Muhammadiyah mosques, study in its schools, work in its hospitals, donate through its philanthropic bodies, or adopt its prayer practices without formally registering as members. The movement's social reach is thus substantially larger and more porous than its administrative membership. The difference between organizational membership, cultural proximity, institutional participation, and doctrinal identification must be

retained rather than collapsed into a single category (Mulkhan, 2000; Muhammadiyah, 2022a).

Classical ethnographies provide a strong foundation for studying this problem. Peacock's account emphasized the symbolic and psychological force of purification among Muhammadiyah activists, while Nakamura showed how the movement created a disciplined urban religious community without fully detaching itself from Javanese social relations. Kim later demonstrated that reformist Muslim identity in a Yogyakarta village emerged through the reinterpretation of everyday practices, the construction of an image of the 'good Muslim,' and continuing interaction with Muslims and Christians who did not share the same reformist commitments (Peacock, 1978; Kim, 2007; Nakamura, 2012). These studies establish that identity is relational and practical, not merely textual.

The problem has become more complex as Muhammadiyah has expanded into a nationwide network of schools, universities, hospitals, mosques, women's organizations, youth associations, professional councils, and digital media. Organizational scale multiplies the sites where identity is learned, but it also multiplies variation. A member socialized in an urban university may experience Muhammadiyah differently from a farmer in a village branch, a woman active in 'Aisyiyah, a young person in Ikatan Pelajar Muhammadiyah, or an employee whose primary connection is an *amal usaha*. Regional religious cultures, class resources, educational backgrounds, and local leadership shape how official principles become ordinary conduct (Burhani, 2010; Latief, 2016).

Religious practice is central because it turns abstract belonging into observable distinctions (Khaulani and Ammatillah, 2023: 91). Prayer gestures, the handling of *qunut*, *tahlil*, funeral rites, Qur'anic recitation, Ramadan schedules, mosque organization, charitable giving, and responses to religious authority can become markers of Muhammadiyah affiliation. Yet such distinctions are rarely absolute. Members may follow official *tarjih* guidance in congregational prayer while participating in family rituals for social reasons. They may reject practices understood as *bid'ah* but retain local language, arts, kinship obligations, and customary ceremonies that are not viewed as contradicting *tauhid*. The boundary between reform and tradition is therefore continuously negotiated (Burhani, 2006; Junaidi, 2022).

Social identity theory clarifies one part of this process. Individuals categorize themselves and others, internalize prototypes of appropriate group conduct, and derive belonging from perceived similarity and distinction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Jenkins, 2014). However, a purely cognitive model is insufficient for a religious organization whose identity is embodied and institutional. Lived religion directs attention to the ways people practice faith in homes, workplaces, associations, and crises, while practice-oriented approaches show how repeated disciplines generate moral subjects rather than simply expressing prior beliefs (Asad, 1993; Ammerman, 2007; Mahmood, 2005).

This article asks three questions. First, what recurring religious practices function as markers and mechanisms of Muhammadiyah social identity? Second, how do organizational institutions convert doctrine into shared repertoires of belonging? Third, how do members negotiate internal diversity and external boundaries across gender,

class, generation, region, and digital settings? The article argues that Muhammadiyah identity is best understood as institutionalized but lived reformism. It is institutionalized because formal guidance, schools, mosques, cadres, and media supply recognizable norms. It is lived because members selectively embody those norms within heterogeneous social worlds.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Religious Practice and Social Identity

Domain	Observable practices	Identity mechanism	Central analytical question
Ritual discipline	Prayer forms, fasting, funeral practice, mosque routines	Embodiment and normative distinction	How does bodily repetition make reformist belonging recognizable?
Religious knowledge	Pengajian, tarjih guidance, reading, digital learning	Authority and cognitive framing	Whose interpretation is trusted and how is it translated into conduct?
Associational life	Meetings, cadres, autonomous organizations, volunteering	Socialization and network attachment	How is membership reproduced through participation and relationships?
Social piety	Philanthropy, education, health, disaster response	Moral credibility and public usefulness	When does service become part of personal and collective identity?
Boundary work	Relations with local custom, NU, Salafi currents, non-Muslims	Differentiation and negotiated inclusion	Which differences are made salient, softened, or crossed?
Intersectional location	Gender, generation, class, occupation, region, media use	Multiple and unequal identifications	Who can embody the official prototype, and under what conditions?

METHOD

The study uses qualitative thematic synthesis, not systematic literature review. The aim is interpretive integration rather than exhaustive retrieval, quantitative mapping, or PRISMA-style claims of comprehensive coverage. The corpus was assembled purposively from three source groups: official Muhammadiyah documents that define expected conduct and organizational identity; historical and anthropological works that describe practices among members; and empirical studies addressing ritual, organizational participation, gender, pluralism, local culture, philanthropy, and digital identity. Only works published no later than 2023 were included.

The official corpus includes the Pedoman Hidup Islami Warga Muhammadiyah, Dakwah Kultural Muhammadiyah, Pernyataan Pikiran Muhammadiyah Abad Kedua, Negara Pancasila sebagai Dar al-'Ahdi wa al-Shahadah, Risalah Islam Berkemajuan, and relevant organizational regulations. These texts are treated as normative constructions of the ideal member rather than direct evidence of actual behavior. Their analytical value lies in identifying authorized vocabularies, duties, boundaries, and desired forms of piety (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2015, 2022a, 2022b).

The empirical corpus prioritizes studies with direct observations, interviews, historical reconstruction, or detailed institutional evidence. Foundational ethnographies by Peacock, Nakamura, Kim, and Mulkhan were used to establish long-term patterns, while later studies were used to assess transformations in pluralism, women's identities, educational settings, local ritual, organizational service, and pandemic-era worship. General theories of social identity and lived religion were included to guide interpretation, not to replace the specific historical context of Indonesian Islam.

Analysis proceeded through iterative coding. Initial codes identified practices, actors, sites, sanctions, emotions, boundaries, and variations. These codes were grouped into themes concerning the good-Muslim prototype, ritual discipline, knowledge and authority, associational piety, social service, boundary negotiation, and intersectional differentiation. The themes were then compared across historical periods and social settings. Attention was given to contradictions between official norms and observed practice, because inconsistency is not simply error; it can reveal competing obligations, weak institutional transmission, or contextual adaptation.

The synthesis has three limitations. First, the available literature is geographically uneven and remains concentrated in Java and urban institutional settings. Second, official sources disproportionately represent leadership perspectives, while ordinary members, inactive affiliates, employees, and those who leave the organization are less visible. Third, much empirical research is based on single sites and cannot establish national prevalence. Accordingly, the findings identify mechanisms and recurring patterns rather than statistical distributions among all Muhammadiyah members.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Reformist Prototype of the Good Muslim

Across the sources, Muhammadiyah identity is organized around a normative prototype of the good Muslim. This prototype combines correct worship, disciplined learning, moral self-control, social usefulness, and organizational responsibility. It rejects the idea that piety is exhausted by inherited status, ritual display, or obedience to charismatic religious figures. The ideal member is expected to examine religious claims, orient practice toward the Qur'an and Sunnah, participate in collective improvement, and demonstrate faith through service. This prototype joins purification and renewal rather than treating them as separate identities (Nashir, 2010; Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022a).

The prototype is historically rooted in the movement's challenge to established religious authority. Early Muhammadiyah replaced several status-based and customary forms of legitimacy with schooling, print, organizational office, and scriptural argument. The shift did not abolish ulama authority, but it changed the conditions under which authority was recognized. Competence, evidence, and organizational accountability became more important, while hereditary prestige and ritual specialization became more contestable (Noer, 1973; Alfian, 1989; Nakamura, 2012).

At the level of members, the good-Muslim prototype operates as a standard of comparison. People evaluate themselves and others through punctual prayer, mosque attendance, willingness to learn, avoidance of practices categorized as superstition, participation in social work, and consistency between speech and conduct. Such comparisons produce pride but also embarrassment and criticism. A person may be described as Muhammadiyah administratively but 'not Muhammadiyah in behavior' if organizational office is not matched by discipline or public ethics. Identity is therefore moralized and graded rather than simply possessed.

The prototype also contains an activist expectation. The *Pedoman Hidup Islami* links personal worship with family, work, society, environmental responsibility, and organizational life. The *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan* similarly presents Islam as a force for emancipation, knowledge, justice, and civilization. These documents make passivity difficult to reconcile with ideal membership. Nevertheless, activist expectations are unevenly realized because time, income, gendered care responsibilities, health, and proximity to institutions affect who can attend meetings or volunteer regularly (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2000, 2022a).

2. Ritual Discipline and Tarjih-Based Authority

Ritual practice is the most visible field of identity marking. Muhammadiyah members are frequently recognized through specific prayer forms, mosque arrangements, Ramadan calculations, and attitudes toward funeral and commemorative rituals. These distinctions condense a wider orientation: worship should be grounded in evidence and protected from additions that cannot be justified through accepted sources. Repetition makes such practices bodily familiar, while collective worship makes them socially legible (Peacock, 1978; Burhani, 2006).

Majelis Tarjih and the circulation of fatwas provide an institutional center for this discipline. Tarjih does not eliminate disagreement, but it creates an authorized process through which members can understand why one practice is preferred. Study circles, school curricula, sermons, books, and digital platforms extend this authority beyond formal scholars. The resulting identity is not simply textualist. It is organizational textualism: scripture is mediated through committees, procedures, publications, and trusted educators.

Ethnographic evidence shows that formal guidance does not mechanically determine conduct. In village settings, members may adopt reformist prayer and mosque practices while maintaining kinship obligations surrounding weddings, death, or neighborhood reciprocity. Participation in a family gathering does not necessarily mean theological acceptance of every ritual element. Members often distinguish social presence from religious endorsement, or they reinterpret a customary event as hospitality rather than sacred obligation (Kim, 2007; Junaidi, 2022).

This situational reasoning reveals that consistency has several meanings. Leaders may define consistency as conformity with tarjih decisions; ordinary members may define it as preserving tauhid while avoiding unnecessary conflict with relatives. The gap should not be reduced to ignorance or disobedience. It reflects the fact that individuals inhabit overlapping moral communities: family, neighborhood, workplace, ethnic tradition, and Muhammadiyah. The costs of ritual distinction are therefore uneven, especially where Muhammadiyah is a local minority.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the strength and fragility of organizational authority. Research among Muhammadiyah citizens found substantial initial compliance with central guidance to limit mosque activities, showing that members could treat public-health expertise as religiously relevant. Yet practices shifted as restrictions eased, and some communities returned to face-to-face worship without consistent health

protocols. Organizational loyalty was real but mediated by local risk perception, fatigue, and the social importance of congregational worship (Efendi & Nihayati, 2021).

3. Associational Piety: Pengajian, Mosques, and Cadre Networks

Muhammadiyah identity is deeply associational. Members learn what the movement means through recurring social forms: pengajian, branch meetings, women's groups, youth activities, mosque committees, school events, fundraising, and cadre training. These settings do more than transmit information. They create friendships, obligations, reputations, and memories that attach individuals to the organization. Belonging is consequently sustained through networks as much as through doctrine (Nakamura, 2012; Nihayati, 2018).

Pengajian is particularly important because it joins knowledge and sociability. A lecture may explain worship, family ethics, politics, or health, but attendance also confirms recognition among participants. Regular presence signals commitment; absence may require explanation. Food, greetings, shared transport, and informal discussion convert religious learning into social capital. This helps explain why digital lectures cannot fully replace local gatherings even when online media expands access.

Mosques function as sites of embodied standardization and local negotiation. They establish prayer routines, teaching schedules, charitable collections, and leadership roles. In a strong branch, the mosque can connect households to schools, youth groups, and social assistance. In a weak branch, it may remain a worship site with limited organizational activity. The density of institutions therefore affects whether Muhammadiyah is experienced as a comprehensive social world or merely a style of ritual practice.

Cadre formation intensifies identity by placing participants in structured learning and collective discipline. Baitul Arqam, Darul Arqam, youth organizations, and leadership courses teach history, ideology, worship, organization, and public responsibility. They also classify members according to commitment and readiness for office. However, episodic training does not guarantee durable identification. Without mentoring, meaningful assignments, and pathways for younger members, the emotional intensity of training may dissipate.

Associational piety can also create closure. Dense networks facilitate trust and mobilization, but they may privilege insiders in recruitment, leadership, and access to information. Employees of Muhammadiyah institutions may be expected to display organizational loyalty even when their connection is primarily professional. Newcomers can encounter a vocabulary and meeting culture that assumes prior familiarity. The same networks that reproduce identity can therefore create distinctions between core cadres, ordinary members, institutional employees, and service users.

4. Al-Ma'un, Social Service, and Publicly Useful Identity

A distinctive finding across the literature is that Muhammadiyah identity is not confined to ritual purification. Al-Ma'un-oriented service supplies a second axis of belonging.

Members are taught that faith should become education, health care, orphan support, philanthropy, disaster response, and empowerment. Participation in these activities produces an identity of useful piety: a good Muhammadiyah Muslim should contribute to solving concrete social problems (Latief, 2010, 2016).

This orientation broadens the meaning of religious practice. Teaching in a school, managing a clinic, donating through Lazismu, volunteering in a disaster, or organizing maternal health can be interpreted as worship when performed with ethical purpose. The movement thereby converts professional and civic activity into religiously meaningful conduct. It also enables members whose ritual style is less publicly visible to express affiliation through work and service.

Service produces public legitimacy because it allows identity claims to be evaluated through benefits delivered beyond the organization. Muhammadiyah institutions routinely serve people who are not members and, in some regions, large numbers of non-Muslims. Biyanto's study of pluralism emphasizes that educational and social institutions can embody respect for diversity through concrete practice rather than abstract tolerance alone (Biyanto, 2020). This non-exclusive service complicates any definition of identity based solely on boundary maintenance.

At the same time, the connection between institution and member identity is not automatic. An employee may work competently in a Muhammadiyah hospital without internalizing movement ideology. A donor may support humanitarian work while disagreeing with tarjih positions. A patient or student may value the institution without becoming Muhammadiyah. Institutional participation thus creates zones of contact and possible identification, but it cannot be counted as conversion or full membership.

The ethical credibility of service affects collective identity. Where schools or hospitals are perceived as accessible, competent, and compassionate, members can experience institutional pride. Where fees, labor relations, or managerial practices contradict al-Ma'un rhetoric, identity becomes vulnerable to cynicism. Social service is therefore not only an output of identity; it is a test of whether the movement's moral narrative remains believable.

Table 2. Thematic Patterns in Muhammadiyah Identity Formation

Theme	Dominant practice	Identity effect	Main variation or tension
Reformist prototype	Disciplined worship, study, ethical self-monitoring	Defines the recognizable ideal member	Official ideals exceed members' available time and resources
Tarjih authority	Following guidance through sermons, publications, and schools	Creates standardized reasons for practice	Local kinship and competing authorities modify compliance
Associational piety	Pengajian, meetings, cadre activity, volunteering	Builds attachment through networks and reputation	Dense networks can exclude newcomers and privilege insiders
Al-Ma'un service	Education, health, philanthropy, disaster response	Links piety to public usefulness	Professional work may detach from ideological formation
Boundary negotiation	Ritual distinction, cultural accommodation, interfaith contact	Clarifies who "we" are in relation to others	Boundaries differ by locality and are often crossed in families
Intersectional differentiation	Gendered organizations, youth media, classed institutions	Produces multiple legitimate styles of membership	Resources and authority remain unevenly distributed

5. Boundary Work: Tradition, Other Islamic Currents, and Plural Society

Collective identity requires boundaries, but Muhammadiyah boundaries are neither fixed nor singular. Historically, ritual distinctions from traditionalist Muslims were highly salient. Practices associated with slametan, tahlil, saint veneration, supernatural protection, or inherited ritual authority became objects of correction. These boundaries helped produce a disciplined reformist community, especially when members were a minority within a broader Javanese religious environment (Peacock, 1978; Kim, 2007).

These distinctions must be situated within the wider diversity of Javanese Islam. Classic accounts show that local religious life has never been a single, static synthesis; it includes changing relations among scriptural piety, mysticism, customary exchange, court traditions, and village ritual. Muhammadiyah intervention therefore entered an already contested field rather than confronting an undifferentiated tradition. The meaning of reform changed as wider Islamization altered the practices against which members defined themselves (Geertz, 1960; Beatty, 1999; Ricklefs, 2012).

Later scholarship complicates the image of complete cultural rejection. Muhammadiyah emerged from Javanese and other local Islamic cultures, and many leaders were trained within older scholarly traditions. The organization has used local languages, arts, kinship structures, and customary idioms to communicate reform. Dakwah kultural formally recognized that culture can be engaged, evaluated, and transformed rather than indiscriminately erased (Burhani, 2010; Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2004).

The practical boundary is therefore selective. Ritual elements understood to assign sacred efficacy to objects, ancestors, or intermediaries attract stronger rejection. Cultural forms categorized as aesthetic, social, educational, or humanitarian can be accommodated. This classification is itself contested because the same event may carry sacred meaning for one participant and social meaning for another. Members routinely perform this interpretive work without waiting for a complete institutional ruling.

Relations with Salafi currents introduce another boundary problem. Both may criticize bid'ah and emphasize textual evidence, but Muhammadiyah's identity includes organizational modernism, education, women's activism, national citizenship, and social service. Some members consume Salafi digital content and adopt stricter dress or gender norms, generating debates over whether purification is being detached from Muhammadiyah's reformist and civic commitments. Identity is thus challenged not only by traditional practice but by rival forms of scripturalism (Latif et al., 2021).

Plural society produces a different mode of boundary work. Official documents frame Indonesia as a shared constitutional covenant, while schools, universities, and humanitarian programs create routine contact with non-Muslims. Such engagement can strengthen a civic Muhammadiyah identity defined by service, fairness, and religious confidence without coercion. Yet pluralist practice varies. Members may support institutional nondiscrimination while retaining exclusivist theological beliefs; these positions are not logically identical and should not be conflated (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015; Biyanto, 2020).

Boundary work also occurs within families. Inter-marriage between Muhammadiyah and non-Muhammadiyah Muslims, migration, education, and digital religious learning expose members to multiple repertoires. Household practice may therefore be negotiated rather than organizationally pure. Family peace, respect for parents, and neighborhood reciprocity can soften public distinction even when individuals maintain private doctrinal preferences.

6. Gendered and Generational Performances of Belonging

Gender shapes both the content and organizational sites of Muhammadiyah identity. 'Aisyiyah, Nasyyatul 'Aisyiyah, and women's educational and health networks have enabled women to act as teachers, preachers, managers, professionals, and public advocates. These roles make women's organizational labor central rather than auxiliary to the movement. Van Doorn-Harder's study shows how Indonesian Muslim women, including Muhammadiyah activists, read scripture and build authority through organized practice (van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

The public identity of Muhammadiyah women also developed within the changing politics of Indonesian womanhood. State programs, family ideology, professional education, and women's organizations created opportunities while defining acceptable femininity. 'Aisyiyah members have negotiated these structures by presenting public leadership as an extension of religious and social responsibility rather than as a rejection of family. This strategy expands agency, but it can also leave unequal domestic labor insufficiently challenged (Blackburn, 2004).

Nevertheless, an egalitarian organizational narrative does not remove gendered constraints. Women often carry disproportionate domestic and care responsibilities, affecting their availability for meetings and leadership. Some institutional settings promote gender equality through reinterpretation of Qur'an and Hadith, while others reproduce conventional divisions of authority. Qibtiyah's research on gender understandings and Hasan and Umiarso's study of Muhammadiyah educational institutions indicate that reformist identity contains multiple gender orientations rather than one uniform position (Qibtiyah, 2018; Hasan & Umiarso, 2023).

Digital media have expanded women's capacity to represent Muhammadiyah identity. Mutiara's analysis of Suara 'Aisyiyah found that the online identity of 'progressive women' is communicated through themes of equal rights, family, lifestyle, youth, and freedom from discrimination. This representation is not merely promotional; it supplies members with images of legitimate female modernity that combine religious commitment, education, public engagement, and gender consciousness (Mutiara, 2023).

Online identity is collectively produced rather than simply broadcast from a central account. Editors select prototypes, audiences comment and recirculate them, and users connect organizational narratives to personal biographies. Digital data can therefore reveal convergence between role identity and group identity, but it also exposes disagreement that print media once filtered more effectively. The networked construction of identity makes official representation faster and wider while reducing institutional control over interpretation (Davis et al., 2019).

Generational change alters the repertoire of belonging. Older members may associate commitment with regular branch meetings, print magazines, long-term office, and mosque-based *pengajian*. Younger members often encounter Muhammadiyah through schools, campus organizations, short-term volunteering, podcasts, social media, environmental campaigns, or professional networks. These forms can appear less loyal because they are episodic, but they may also be more responsive to issue-based participation and contemporary communication.

Digital religious authority weakens the organization's monopoly over member socialization. A young person can follow Muhammadiyah accounts, Salafi preachers, popular motivational speakers, feminist Muslim scholars, and secular influencers simultaneously. Algorithmic media place incompatible norms in the same personal feed. Identity becomes a process of curation, and organizational affiliation does not predict a single information environment. Muhammadiyah's challenge is not merely to produce more content, but to cultivate critical habits for evaluating sources and integrating knowledge with organizational ethics.

7. Class, Region, and Unequal Access to the Muhammadiyah Repertoire

Muhammadiyah has long been associated with urban traders, teachers, professionals, and an expanding Muslim middle class. Schools, print culture, bureaucratic organization, and professional service made its reformist style compatible with modern occupations. Yet the movement has also developed strong rural branches and local forms that cannot be reduced to urban middle-class culture. Mulkhan's study of farmers and Kim's village ethnography show that reformist identity is reconstructed within agrarian settings rather than merely imported from cities (Mulkhan, 2000; Kim, 2007).

Class affects the capacity to perform the ideal identity. Educated middle-class members have greater access to books, conferences, organizational office, digital networks, and voluntary time. They may define legitimate commitment in ways that privilege speech, credentials, and administrative competence. Lower-income members can be highly active in mosque maintenance, local charity, and mutual assistance while remaining underrepresented in formal leadership. A synthesis centered only on national elites would therefore mistake organizational visibility for total participation.

Amal usaha also creates classed identities. Elite schools and universities can symbolize educational advancement and produce proud alumni networks, but rising costs may distance institutions from lower-income communities. Hospitals and philanthropic organizations similarly mediate encounters between professional staff, donors, volunteers, and recipients. Each position offers a different relationship to Muhammadiyah: ownership, employment, service, dependency, or gratitude. The label 'member' can obscure these unequal institutional locations.

Regional culture shapes which practices become identity markers. In Yogyakarta or parts of West Sumatra, Muhammadiyah may be sufficiently established that affiliation is ordinary and locally prestigious. In regions dominated by other Islamic traditions or by non-Muslim populations, membership can be more consciously asserted and socially negotiated. The same ritual difference may be routine in one locality and conflictual in

another. Regional variation also affects language, arts, food, funeral customs, and relations with customary authority.

These inequalities make a single national prototype sociologically incomplete. Muhammadiyah supplies a common vocabulary, but members inhabit different opportunity structures. Coherence depends on whether the organization recognizes multiple pathways of contribution rather than equating commitment with office, formal education, or continuous meeting attendance. A socially credible identity must include those whose religious practice is expressed through care work, manual labor, neighborhood solidarity, or occasional but meaningful participation.

Discussion

1. Muhammadiyah Identity as Institutionalized Lived Reformism

The thematic findings support the concept of institutionalized lived reformism. The term 'institutionalized' captures the movement's capacity to stabilize norms through tarjih, schools, mosques, autonomous organizations, cadres, publications, and service institutions. These arrangements make reformist practices repeatable beyond a founder's charisma or a single locality. They also provide sanctions and rewards: recognition, office, trust, criticism, and access to organizational networks.

The term 'lived' prevents institutional coherence from being mistaken for behavioral uniformity. Members encounter official norms within family obligations, local culture, economic constraints, gender relations, occupational routines, and digital media. They interpret, combine, and sometimes suspend norms. Such variation does not mean that identity is meaningless. On the contrary, negotiation shows that the Muhammadiyah repertoire is sufficiently recognizable to become an object of choice, compromise, and dispute.

This formulation moves beyond a binary between doctrine and practice. Practice is not a defective copy of doctrine, and doctrine is not merely rhetoric. Normative texts shape categories through which members understand worship, culture, service, and citizenship. Everyday experience, however, feeds back into institutional discourse. Dakwah kultural, pluralism, digital ethics, and progressive women's identity all reflect attempts to respond to situations that older formulas did not fully anticipate.

Social identity theory helps explain prototypicality and boundary distinction, but the findings also show that belonging depends on institutions capable of organizing action. A member identifies not only by thinking 'I am Muhammadiyah' but by praying in a particular way, trusting certain authorities, attending a network, giving through an organization, and recognizing an obligation to serve. Identity is produced through coordinated practices that have material infrastructure.

2. Unity without Uniformity

The movement's unity is real but should be specified. It rests on shared reference points - the Qur'an and Sunnah, tajdid, tarjih, al-Ma'un, organized action, and public service - rather than identical behavior in every setting. Members can disagree over cultural participation, gender interpretation, political choices, digital preachers, or the intensity of

ritual distinction while still recognizing one another within a common organizational world.

Uniformity is strongest where practice is easily standardized and repeatedly observed, such as prayer routines in Muhammadiyah mosques or official meeting procedures. It is weaker in domains governed by family, market, or local custom. This explains why ritual symbols can become disproportionately important. They provide simple and visible signals of belonging when deeper ethical commitments are difficult to monitor. The risk is that identity becomes reduced to easily policed differences while justice, professionalism, and compassion receive less scrutiny.

A mature organizational identity therefore requires layered standards. Some matters can be governed through clear guidance, while others require principles, deliberation, and contextual judgment. Treating every difference as disloyalty encourages concealment and weakens learning. Treating all variation as equally acceptable dissolves the meaning of the movement. The productive middle lies in distinguishing core ethical commitments, authorized diversity, contextual accommodation, and conduct that directly contradicts institutional values.

The evidence also challenges the idea that purification and social openness are mutually exclusive. Muhammadiyah can maintain a distinct ritual identity while serving non-members and cooperating across religious boundaries. Conversely, institutional pluralism does not guarantee that all members hold pluralist attitudes. Organizational identity is distributed across doctrine, service, and interpersonal practice, and these dimensions may develop at different speeds.

3. From Membership Counting to Identity Quality

The synthesis has practical implications for how Muhammadiyah evaluates membership. Counting cards, branches, meeting attendance, or employees reveals organizational scale but not identity quality. A stronger assessment would examine whether members understand the movement's ethical orientation, trust its knowledge procedures, participate in meaningful networks, and perceive institutional conduct as consistent with declared values.

Identity quality also requires attention to exit and disengagement. People may reduce participation because of work pressure, family conflict, institutional disappointment, political polarization, or attraction to other religious authorities. These experiences are analytically valuable because they reveal where socialization fails or where organizational culture becomes inaccessible. An organization that studies only active cadres will systematically overestimate coherence.

Cadre programs should therefore move beyond information transfer. They need reflective discussion of real dilemmas: mixed-family rituals, professional ethics, gendered labor, digital misinformation, political disagreement, and the cost of maintaining public services. Members are more likely to internalize identity when official principles help them navigate actual social conflicts rather than merely recite historical facts.

Institutional credibility is decisive. Members cannot be expected to embody al-Ma'un, justice, and progressive Islam if schools, hospitals, or offices tolerate exclusion, poor labor practices, or unaccountable leadership. Organizational identity is learned from what institutions reward and permit, not only from what instructors teach. Governance reform is therefore a form of religious education.

Table 3. Indicators for Assessing the Quality of Muhammadiyah Social Identity

Dimension	Weak indicator	Stronger indicator	Risk if ignored
Doctrinal orientation	Ability to repeat slogans	Capacity to reason with principles in concrete dilemmas	Formalism and dependence on authority
Ritual practice	Visible conformity in selected rituals	Consistent worship joined with humility and social ethics	Boundary policing without moral depth
Organizational belonging	Membership card or office	Sustained participation, trust, mentoring, and accountable service	Administrative membership without attachment
Social piety	Number of charitable activities	Accessible, fair, and measurable benefits with community feedback	Institutional pride masking exclusion
Diversity management	Absence of open conflict	Legitimate channels for disagreement and contextual adaptation	Concealed fragmentation or coercive uniformity
Intergenerational continuity	Youth attendance at formal events	Youth agency in designing programs and producing knowledge	Symbolic inclusion followed by disengagement

4. Research Implications

Future research should treat Muhammadiyah members as a heterogeneous population rather than a single respondent category. Comparative ethnography is needed across urban and rural areas, Java and outer islands, strong and weak branches, and different autonomous organizations. Studies should distinguish leaders, formal members, cultural affiliates, institutional employees, students, service users, and former members.

Longitudinal research would clarify how identities change across life stages. Schooling may create early familiarity, university organizations may intensify ideological engagement, marriage may require ritual negotiation, employment may produce professional identification, and retirement may increase branch participation. Digital media also require panel research because platforms and religious influencers change rapidly.

Mixed methods can measure patterns without reducing identity to a scale. Surveys may assess ritual practice, organizational attachment, trust in tarjih, service participation, boundary attitudes, and perceived institutional integrity. These should be paired with interviews and observation to understand why similar answers arise from different experiences. Network analysis could show how local leaders, schools, families, and digital accounts structure exposure to Muhammadiyah norms.

Finally, research must include contradiction as a substantive finding. A member can be ritually reformist, culturally accommodative, politically conservative, professionally cosmopolitan, and organizationally inactive. Such combinations are not noise. They show

how contemporary Muslim identity is assembled from overlapping institutions and moral projects.

CONCLUSION

Religious practice and social identity among Muhammadiyah members are linked through a broad repertoire rather than a single doctrinal test. Ritual discipline, tarjih-based knowledge, pengajian, mosque life, cadre networks, philanthropy, education, health service, cultural negotiation, and civic engagement all contribute to a recognizable reformist belonging. These practices transform identity from an administrative label into embodied conduct and social relationship.

The synthesis also shows that Muhammadiyah identity is internally differentiated. Members negotiate official guidance with family obligations, local traditions, class resources, gender roles, generational preferences, regional cultures, and digital authorities. Consequently, inconsistency cannot be interpreted only as weak commitment. It may express contextual accommodation, multiple loyalties, unequal opportunity, or unresolved institutional tension.

Muhammadiyah's distinctive strength is its capacity to institutionalize religious ideals. The same institutionalization creates its central vulnerability: procedures, facilities, and symbolic differences can survive after moral purpose weakens. The quality of identity therefore depends less on numerical expansion or visible conformity than on whether members and institutions demonstrate disciplined reasoning, accountable service, social fairness, and the ability to manage legitimate diversity.

Practicing reform and performing belonging are ultimately inseparable. Members learn what Muhammadiyah is by observing how its people pray, teach, lead, disagree, serve, and treat outsiders. A credible social identity must therefore be reproduced not only in doctrine but in institutions and everyday relationships that make progressive Islam publicly intelligible.

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